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Inside Report

Watergate Repercussions

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — The most politically significant aspect of Clark MacGregor's uncharacteristically harsh assault on the Washington Post's coverage of the Watergate affair is the fact it was ordered directly from the White House Oval Office.

MacGregor, President Nixon's campaign manager, was pondering what to do next about the deepening swamp of charges when orders came from the White House Monday to attack. Not understanding the ground rules, an aide informed newsmen that MacGregor would be available for questions after his carefully drafted statement attacking the Post.

INSTEAD, the White House ruled out any questions at all. So the usually genial MacGregor was viewed on national television making an angry ad hominem attack on the newspaper then stalking redfaced from the room.

That was in keeping with overall White House strategy ever since Republican - financed spies were caught bugging Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate June 17. The strategy: Don't get too excited about this little caper and fire back hard at anybody who criticizes us. With two weeks to Election Day, that strategy has become increasingly troubling to thoughtful Republicans.

Nobody believes that the Watergate indictments or the attendant charges of political subversion seriously threaten Mr. Nixon's landslide. Rather, his silent Republican critics fear the long shadow the president's see-no-evil, hear-no-evil reaction casts on his second term.

One prominent Midwestern state Republican leader has argued with this White House strategy in terms instantly recognizable to Richard M. Nixon: the Alger Hiss case of a generation ago.

While freshman Congressman Nixon was escaping anonymity in his relentless pursuit of espionage charges against Hiss, President Harry Truman was pooh - poohing the entire affair. That gave congressional Republicans an open pass for heavily publicized hearings that helped build the huge Republican victory of 1952.

By pooh-poohing the Watergate, the Midwestern state leader fears, Mr. Nixon opened up a politically profitable investigation in 1973 on which Sen. Edward M. Kennedy has now taken out an option.

Doubts are not confined to liberal Republicans. Conservative Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas, Republican National Chairman, publicly adheres to the Nixon strategy. But privately he feels White House handling of the Watergate affair is atrocious.

Even John B. Connally, a full - fledged presidential crony, tells intimates he would have stressed the moral outrage of the Watergate bugging had he been in charge.

MR. NIXON ignores recommendations that he preempt Kennedy and the Democrats with a special high - level investigation outside regular government channels.

The Nixon political operation, from the president on down to low - level staffers, harbors a self - righteous conviction the media treatment of the affair has been entirely motivated by anti - Nixon sentiment and has slanderously connected the White House with a crime for which it is not responsible.